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Baptism of Our Lord Series A 2017

Phillip L. Brandt

Concordia University - Portland, pbrandt@cu-portland.edu

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Baptism of our Lord, Jan 8

The Sunday after the Epiphany is always the feast of the Baptism of our Lord. Here, at the beginning of his ministry, the Lord is revealed by the attestation of the voice from heaven, God's voice: This is my Son. The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus and we are given to see all members of the Trinity together on one page of sacred text. But the main point is that this is revealing the Jesus who was worshiped by mages last week and was celebrated as incarnate the week before. The Epiphany theme continues. The Lord has so hidden himself in the flesh of man that he needs to be pointed out to us or we would miss him. So authentic is his humanity that we might simply pass over him as another simple human being, one of the billions who have run this race. But this contestant in the human struggle is no mere man. He is also the Lord of heaven and earth, he is God. So our ears and our eyes are given to see and hear that this man who stands under the trickling waters of John's baptism is not simply another in a long line of penitents. He is man and God. He is revealed.

This raises a number of questions for us, some of which bear fruit in sermons. What is the baptism of John? If we understand it to be a baptism of repentance, is that the same baptism into which we are baptized? Or is our Triune baptism a baptism of repentance and something more? Was John's baptism something more? What is the connection between our baptism and the baptism of John? The prayer obviously wants to connect our baptism to Jesus' baptism, but we will need to understand the nature of that connection. (Our Baptist neighbors may insist that John's is a Christian baptism, that the Christian baptism and John's baptism are identical. They will insist in turn that they are still doing that sort of baptism. Are they right? What do they do with Acts 18 and 19 in which Paul re-baptized those who only knew John's baptism?)

If it is a baptism of repentance and something different than the Christian repentance, as is most commonly understood, just what is Jesus doing there? After all, did he not lead the sinless life? Why is he repenting? He has committed no sin of which he must repent. Matthew's treatment of this event seems to address this very subject. John raises the question when Jesus shows up at the water. "I have need to be baptized by you," says John. But Jesus will insist. It is to "fulfill all righteousness." What does he mean by that? How is this seemingly inappropriate baptism of a man who did not need to repent fulfilling all righteousness? It would seem to be an inappropriate thing to do. If you forgive an innocent man, that is not justice but a breach of justice, for he has done nothing which needs the forgiveness. What would have been lacking if Jesus did not do this?

The best way to answer that it seems to me is to remember that Jesus came to bear the sins of the world. He is at the same moment both sinless and sin. (See II Corinthians 5:21 – "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.") He has willingly shouldered the burden we cannot bear and that means that he will repent of these sins in a way we cannot. In one sense he should not be here, but in another and very real sense, he needs to repent more than anyone else, for his burden of sin is the aggregate

sin of the whole world. If he doesn't, we are incapable of doing it and all is lost. If all righteousness is to be fulfilled, these sins must be repented of. I cannot get the repentance piece correct and it has to be done. Jesus even repents for me.

What does this do to our understanding of repentance? Is it just guilt or is it something more? I have always contended that the biblical term for repentance could be simply understood as an honest appraisal of our current condition. If I am sick and I tell God in prayer that I am sick, that is a form of confession, repentance. I don't want to be sick anymore, I would leave the illness behind and be healthy, and I need God to give that to me. If I come to the moment of confession in Church and my heart aches because my friend has died, I don't think that I need to begin with some guilty feelings to be confessing or repenting. Simply laying my sorrow at Jesus feet is another form of repentance, of contrition, of confession. In much the same way a person who feels guilty will say that they don't want to be the sinner anymore, they would much rather leave it behind them and be done with it.

Jesus is revealed today as the one who bears our sins, even repenting of them perfectly. He not only bears the sins of our naughtiness, but also the sins of our brokenness.

We might also ask if John's baptism is a summoning out of the temple worship of the day. John's location in the desert, away from the traditional site of the Jewish cult suggests that perhaps he was making a statement against that establishment. Was he calling the people of Israel back out into the desert where they were formed and forged as a nation under Israel, where Elijah had fled from the evil of Ahab, where Isaiah saw them being purified in the days of the exile?

We might also wonder what the main message of the baptism of Jesus is. Perhaps it was to be found in the obedient submission of Jesus. The current generation doesn't want to hear sermons about obedience. To what is God calling us today?

We were struck by the phrase of Jesus: "fulfilled all righteousness." John was part of fulfilling the ministry of Christ. We too are part of that. One could go to Matt 28 with that, or Colossians or Romans where Paul speaks of his own ministry filling up the ministry of Christ. One could see this connect to II Corinthians 4-5 in which we are called ambassadors for Christ.

We also thought that this Sunday might just be a time to focus on Baptism. This event would inaugurate the ministry of Christ. What he does from this point really flows out his baptism. Are we really best off to preach baptism on this day? Our folks don't locate their own lives sufficiently in their baptism and its vocation/call. (This is more likely the Epistle reading sermon for the day.)

Collect of the Day

Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River You proclaimed Him Your beloved Son and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized in His name faithful in their calling as your children and inheritors with Him of everlasting life; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This prayer asks us to consider the baptism of Jesus and then jumps to our own baptism? Is that legitimate? Of course remembering our own baptism is a very Lutheran thing to do and never inappropriate, but at how deep of a level dare we take the connection between the baptism of Jesus at the hands of John and the baptism commissioned by Jesus in Matthew 28? In an interesting chapter in Acts, Paul runs into some fellows who know only the baptism of John. He baptizes them. This would suggest that that the baptism of John is not the same thing. (Acts 19:1-7)

Of course both baptisms involve repentance and water, but the Christian baptism involves something more, it also is the promise to forgive and restore that of which one repents. Was that promised action by God implicit in the baptism which John administered to the people in the Jordan or were they expecting that forgiveness to come later? We read in our confessions that the water of a Christian baptism is not only symbol of the washing which we seek, it is the very washing itself. John was preparing people for this event, he was not actually forgiving their sins, he was getting them ready to be forgiven, or was his baptism more than that? The Christian baptism is an act of that forgiveness, was John's? If so, why did Paul re-baptize?

I only bring this up because it is so easily confused and in a climate in which so many are suggesting that our baptism is but a symbol of some inner working by the Holy Spirit, we are given an occasion to speak of our sacramental and incarnate Lord working a miracle in my life though the water of baptism. Don't miss that opportunity.

Perhaps a word also needs to be made of the repentance element in Christian baptism. In the rite we know today this has somewhat atrophied into the "Do you renounce the Devil and all his works and all his ways." For the ancients, this was a very serious matter. They understood that baptism involved a wholesale change of heart and life. We will see this clearly in today's epistle lesson. The emperor Constantine delayed his baptism until his death bed because he knew that some imperial actions were incompatible with what was expected of the baptized. Do we have any such notion about baptism today? Is it simply a ritual, often done to appease grandparents or to enroll a child in a church to which the parents have little or no affiliation? Do we need to be saying "No" to more candidates for baptism if we are praying this prayer honestly? If someone does not have any intention of fulfilling their promise should we baptize them? Does it work that way? I know that my father and other Pastors I respect a great deal would baptize any willing candidate or child whose parents brought him/her to the font. I laud that and there is a confession being made in that very stance. Baptism does something to the person who is baptized. Yet, I wonder if we don't need to regain that element of baptismal repentance.

We are asking God to make all of us faithful to our calling as the children of God and fellow heirs with Christ of heaven itself. Do we actually think that a person should be different after their baptism? How so? This might be a very fruitful discussion and have some serious homiletic implications.

These questions may also be a distraction, and we need to remember this, lest we lose sight of the most important things. Perhaps the connection between the story we read today and the baptism we enjoy in Christian churches is not the baptismal act itself, but the one who gets baptized today in the Gospel lesson is in fact the one into whose name we are baptized.

Readings

Isaiah 42:1-9

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
² He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
³ a bruised reed he will not break,
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
⁴ He will not grow faint or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law.
⁵ Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people on it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
⁶ “I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness;
I will take you by the hand and keep you;
I will give you as a covenant for the people,
a light for the nations,
⁷ to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
⁸ I am the LORD; that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to carved idols.
⁹ Behold, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth
I tell you of them.”

Tonight we were struck by the image of verse six in which God tells the servant that he will take him by the hand. That seemed like a wonderful comforting image to us. When someone takes us by the hand and leads us, like when we were children being led by our parents, we are safe, we are on the right course, we are being helped.

Of course, this passage refers to Jesus, whom the father takes by the hand today in baptism and leads through ministry, suffering, death, resurrection, and glorious victory. But God took him by the hand for a very specific reason. God sets him as the covenant to the nations who brings light and sight to the blind and leads the prisoner out of the dungeon. Anyone who is suffering with grief knows what it means to be blinded by tears and trapped in a reality which they cannot change. Jesus leads the mourner to open eyes to see and out of the prison of self-absorbed grief. That is not to say that it is wrong to weep at the death of a friend, but the divine promise that is spoken through the death and resurrection of this servant takes us past grief to laugh and rejoice again. Jesus does this very thing today. He does it all the time to people. That is preachable!

For the folks to whom these words were written that undoubtedly had something to do with the political and social realities of exile and the straights in which they found themselves. The preacher, however, will be looking over folks who are enduring exiles of other sorts, exiles of grief, exiles of suffering, exiles of broken relationship, etc. He proclaims that this same Jesus has come for all those exiles, to give light, to free them.

We thought the first paragraph of this reading was really important for this idea. Isaiah there speaks of the gentleness of the servant. He brings justice but he does not quench the dimly burning wick. We think justice comes from the government, it is forced on the world. We see justice when the bad guys get thrown in jail, when the crimes are punished, when the oppressor is cast down. But Jesus brings justice to the world very differently. He releases the prisoners, he opens the eyes to see, not only the physical sight which needs vision correction, but also the eyes of mind and heart which can be clenched tightly shut, myopically distorted by error and hatred, or simply not able to see the beautiful king and kingdom which are right in front of us. He dies on the cross and forgives the sinners. He raises the dead. He is not forcing this on anyone, but rather it is forced on him as soldiers take him and slay him. This nature of the kingdom remains operative today. It is not just Jesus who was this way long ago, this is the way that he works today. It is hard for us to work this way because the world only seems to work this way and it feels like we will get trampled upon by the world. But the believer has confidence that Jesus often does his best work through the weak and helpless folks. Remember, disciples don't look like they will get much done. They are a scurvy lot of fishermen, tax collectors, and others. In this way, this sermon must avoid the pitfall of the theologian of glory. We are theologians of the cross.

Jesus will not be discouraged. We might be, but he will never be. He will see this through. That takes a huge burden off our shoulders. He pursues the justice of the world beyond our abilities. He strengthens us, but he never abandons the effort even when we fail.

The preacher will likely want to read the whole of chapter 42, indeed, you might just start at 40 and continue through 43. Read it slowly and thoughtfully. This is one of the classic pieces of ancient poetry and it is truly beautiful.

There is an interesting John point to make here too. Remember on the third Sunday of Advent when John sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was really the one? Jesus response to the imprisoned John seems to deliberately miss this passage. This is one of the “bring the prisoner out of the dungeon” passages that Jesus does not quote when John sends his followers to inquire of him.

This is the first of a series of “servant songs” which occupy much of the remaining chapters of Isaiah’s majestic book. The servant will slowly develop with greater and greater clarity until we get to chapter 53 and Isaiah’s spine-tingling prophecies of the death of Christ. “He was pierced for our transgressions...” These servant songs are vitally important for the Christology of the Christian people. Luther, officially an OT scholar on the faculty of Wittenberg, always insisted that the OT stood behind all NT preaching and witness to Christ. He found it easier to derive Christology and Trinity from the OT than the NT for that reason. Because Isaiah is alluded to frequently in Paul’s letters, I think that he must have spent a great deal of time contemplating these passages in his years in the desert and in Tarsus after his conversion event and before he started preaching. He had to fit the Damascus road event and the reality that he spoke to Jesus of Nazareth that day into the Old Testament, and these servant songs really allowed him to do that.

For our purposes the text just fits this day beautifully. God is affirming in the Baptism of Jesus, for our sake, the very things that Isaiah has God speaking in this text. Notice that this makes Isaiah 42 a description of Christ’s ministry to us. This works best when we think of Jesus standing in that water bearing the sins of the whole world, the sins he will finally bear up Calvary’s mournful mountain on Good Friday.

For the preacher in Epiphany, this text makes a great overview of the ministry and mission of Christ. You can preach a great sermon simply on why Jesus came and what he did here. He came with divine authority. He came in humility. He came to bring forth real justice between God and men. He came with resolve to see this thing through. He came to save people made helpless by their sin, imprisoned and blind. He came to do something new – God would bear the sins, God would die their death, God has lived up to his name and Saved us all. That might be the best option for an overview/introduction to the following weeks.

The preacher may want to expand the identity of the servant. Yes, of course it is Jesus, but has not God also poured out his Spirit upon us in our baptism? Do we not bring people out of the dungeons of sin and the darkness of unbelief? Is it not good news for us that God, having called us to mighty deeds, has promised to take us by the hand and to keep us? Preaching needs to be a proclamation of Christ, but that proclamation cannot be simply a past-tense historical recitation

of events. It needs to point to Jesus now – and we do that best when we point to that Jesus, that servant, in the lives, deeds, hearts, and words of the people to whom we speak.

Psalm 29

Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

² Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.

³ The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over many waters.

⁴ The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

⁵ The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

⁶ He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.

⁷ The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.

⁸ The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

⁹ The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth
and strips the forests bare,
and in his temple all cry, “Glory!”

¹⁰ The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.

¹¹ May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Romans 6:1-11

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body

of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. ¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

We had a hard time imagining that people would actually use the logic that Paul utilizes here. But Paul may not have an actual conversation in mind here – he may have posited this imagined conversation because he wants to say something about the love and forgiveness of God shown to us. What is that?

- 1. The “by no means” suggests that what Paul is saying here is not an optional thing, but a matter of some necessity.*
- 2. We cannot say that God’s love is somehow dependent on our love for God. He eliminated that line of argument in chapter five. He died for us when we were his enemies.*
- 3. The line of argumentation is different. Paul seems to be cutting off a line of argumentation that says that our lives lived are not significant. God’s love and favor are not bought or lost because of what we do. But that could be understood to render our lives meaningless – they are valueless. But Paul won’t let that line stand.*
- 4. Our lives are not meaningless. The love of God has transformed them and given what we say and do real value. Raised with Christ, he lives in us and through us. We are united to him. Being dead to sin and alive to the love of God is simply who we are.*
- 5. The deeds done in Christ, no longer to buy and sell the favor of God, those deeds are the truly righteous deeds. The man or woman who is attempting to buy God’s favor, attempts to do righteousness, but fails. The man or woman in whom Christ lives, does the truly righteous thing.*

When you read Paul’s letter to the Romans you have to put the passage you are considering into its context and the shape of the whole book. The letter to the Romans presents us with the longest sustained single argument in the entire NT. After introductory remarks, Paul states his thesis in Romans 1:16-17. Then, beginning at verse 18 and continuing until 3:20 he states what is known as an antithesis. It is stating the problem, or the contrary of the thesis which is designed to point out the significance of the thesis. Then, in the famous passage contained in 3:21-27, he restates the thesis in greater detail. Chapter 4 is an illustration from the Torah. Chapter 5 is the

argument for why the thesis is valid, and chapter 6, our reading today, begins a section which treats potential objections raised to the thesis. This continues through chapter 7. In chapter 8 he summarizes/recapitulates the whole argument in that marvelous passage which many of us have memorized “all things work for the good of those who love God...If Christ is for us, who can be against us...Who can separate us from the love of Christ?...” Chapter 9 then begins a series of examples of how Paul applies this to the situations at hand.

As you can see from the above, it is essential to know the thesis and its argument before you can really understand Paul’s treatments of the objections to that thesis.

When you see these verses in that context, you can realize that this text approaches some of the very questions which we posed in the introduction and comments on the prayer and it really introduces a new element. Earlier we asked about the state of the baptized. Paul poses a rhetorical question which may seem silly to us, but it really is not. We don’t know of anyone who really asked this question at the time, but rhetorical questions enable us to consider things. Since Christ has forgiven all the sins and we do not cause our own salvation, why do we do the good things we are supposed to do, especially if we don’t have to? Could we not simply jump into the grossest of sins and count on the forgiveness of Christ to cover them all? In truth, would we not then experience even more forgiveness? After all, I am not saved because I earn something, nor because I am paying some debt. The logic of this seems unassailable but we know something is wrong with it.

Paul’s denial of that logic could hardly be stronger. Paul has in earlier chapters dispensed with the idea that salvation is somehow in an economy of buying and selling with God, as if he is reacting to my deeds. Now, when he explores this objection, he will explore a second real mystery of this; and it is a mystery. If I don’t do the good to get something from God, why do it? In the days of Martin Luther, his Roman Catholic opponents raised this question. They thought Luther was simply enabling people to do nothing, to be sinful without consequence. But Luther also saw what Paul is talking about here. We do the good we do because our lives have been mysteriously united with him who knew no sin. We have been given the very righteousness of God, our names are in heaven and our lives are attracted to that heavenly perfection. It is not an automatic thing, nor is it a complete thing until that last day, but change does happen. We are no longer citizens of the old kingdom, but now we are united to a new king, Jesus.

Paul will spend much of the rest of the book wrestling with this question. In a very real sense this is the question which has occupied much of Paul’s letter writing career. Galatians and Philippians and several other of Paul’s letters will have extensive treatments of this subject: If I don’t have to do something to earn God’s favor, why should I do it?

The mystery for us really comes down to the fact that our lives are God’s work, and yet, we participate in this. This is sanctification, but it is sanctification empowered by God’s love expressed in Jesus, a powerful thing indeed. Remember the old question of who works in baptism. Of course God works, but at the same time if we don’t splash water and say words, if

parents don't bring the child, there is no baptism, God does not do that work. He makes himself strangely dependent on us in this regard. Luther says he binds himself to us. Where does our work and his work separate? It is not an easy thing to say.

Some have thought that Paul comes across in the passage as a little naïve. Yes, I am baptized into a new life, but so often I don't see that. But Paul is not naïve. Paul will continue to wrestle with this mystery which he introduces here. Indeed, in chapter seven he will admit that no man can escape the war that goes on in his members, except that Christ frees him from the body of death.

What baptism does for us is puts us on the other side of the cross. It is hard for us whose lives frequently are still on the sinful side of that gateway to remember that God sees us from the other side of the cross than the one which I most often see. I tend to see the sinner and forget the saint that God has made. God sees the sinner fading away, dying. He sees the saint whom he has created coming more and more clearly into focus. It is a good work which he will complete on the day of Christ (Philippians 1:6). My freedom comes when I see myself in God's vision, not my old vision.

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

We were struck here that Jesus hears these words, but Matthew considers that we need to hear them too. Jesus is God's beloved Son. Of course as catechized Christians we know this, but do we consider just what that means? Others have done miracles, including prophets in the OT. John was a preacher who gathered great crowds. It is not the deeds of Jesus that make him special, it is Jesus who makes the deeds special. It is now the Son of God doing these things, not just another prophet. He takes the children into his arms and that changes the way we see children. He touches the leper and the leper is cleansed (Mt 8:1-4). Normally when the unclean touches the clean, the clean is contaminated, but not when it is the Son of God who is the one touching the leper. This statement about Jesus' nature and relationship to the Father casts all the rest of this book into another light. The reader needs to hear this. Jesus is God's Son! That tunes our hearts and lives to resonate with his words and deeds.

Some years ago this passage occasioned considerable discussion. We wondered about who is the "him" to which the heavens are opened in verse 16. Is it John or is it Jesus? Is it John who sees the Spirit descend? Is it John that hears the voice? Doesn't Jesus already know this? Other

Gospel writers admit that the folks around don't understand the voice. They think it is thunder. What does that mean? How does it change the story? It is not grammatically impossible that John is the antecedent of the "him" however it is not the most natural reading of the grammar. Usually the antecedent is the immediately prior possible noun, in this case it would be Jesus, but John has already shown up as a "he" in this sentence. As we were talking about this, we also saw a certain parallel with the Transfiguration event when the three disciples heard the voice and saw Jesus transfigured with Moses and Elijah.

We also wondered if this was an encouragement for John the Baptist. John opens up here questioning the propriety of what he is doing. John doesn't feel worthy to be there, unworthy to tie the sandals of Jesus, yet now he is shown by God himself that this is the very place where he needs to be. Heaven is opened up to John and we are given to see with John's eyes this morning. Are we really here in the eyes of John seeing all this unfold?

Does this mean that I also have heaven opened up to me? Can I see the things of this life with that openness? John suddenly may have been given to see this other rather mundane event now as a holy event. In a sense, is this John's baptism as much as it is Jesus'? Are we the ones who are given to see here? Is this passage really about opening our eyes to see heaven? That opening would surely have to start with the way we see this very event. Jesus will in John tell his disciples that whoever has seen "me" has seen the Father. He is the open window to heaven.

How does the return us to the essential question "What must I do to be saved?" We have a tendency to come up with an answer which usually involves something that I do, even if it involves what something which we think we can do like "believe" or "repent" or something like that. We don't usually say, "breathing" or even the thing no one will fail to do, "die." Is this the heavens opening up for us? It isn't about my believing or my repenting, it is about my being what God has made me (back to the Epistle lesson.)

Here is the bare bones story. What will we make of it? John resists, Jesus insists. Is it because he bears the sins of the world? I think so. John relents before this insistence. As Matthew tells this account, the moment of baptism is not even recorded, but what happens at that moment and afterward is. A dove, the Holy Spirit, descends and a voice speaks: This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." The other Gospel writers make much of the fact that many did not understand this, thought it was thunder. Matthew simply records the words. Why do we need to know this now? Why did Matthew's first-century persecuted Jewish Christian audience need to hear this? Why does our twenty-first century complacent Christian audience need to hear this today?

Jesus will embark, from this point, on his dramatic ministry and mission which of course culminates in the passion and resurrection and ascension. Jesus does all this with revealed divine authority. This text really is about establishing that Jesus has the authority to do what he does in the subsequent chapters. He casts out the demons, he heals the sick, he calms the storms, he dies a sacrificial death for all the world. He can do that, He is the very Son of God. What

makes all this meaningful to us today is that he is filled with the Spirit and is acting as the beloved Son of God, on a mission for His Father. Another sermon is to be found right here in the authority of Jesus, the authority he will reference in the last chapter when he institutes the baptism by which we are united to him.

Of course authority is a difficult subject for us. Americans don't like authority. Culturally we have idolized the rebellious youth who contradicts, rebels against, and overthrows authority. We fear authority. If I say that authorities are after you, you are afraid, or at least you should be.

The Bible speaks, however, of divine authority very differently and perhaps that dissonance is itself able to become a sermon. God's authority is the authority to save. God, the author of life, is authorized thereby to restore life to dying and broken creation.

Law

1. We are burdened by great sin and brokenness of mind, body and spirit. All our New Year resolutions are probably already broken. If not, will they make it to the end of the year? We hope so, but let's be honest here.
2. We are called to a new life in our Baptism. Yet the old man clings tightly to us. Too often we are indistinguishable from the society around us when it comes to living as we ought. (See the work of George Barna for some data on that.) Prisons are filled with folks whose parents brought them to baptism or who brought themselves at some point in their lives. Pews are sometimes also filled with less dramatic but just as stubborn sinners whose enslavement to gossip or covetousness or lust is equally profound.
3. We cannot even really repent of all this very well. Our will is enslaved. We might weep tears of contrition and yet in our heart of hearts lurks a little or a lot of blackness which delights in our repented sin. God knows this and is disgusted by it.
4. Even when I worship, even when I am at my best, I cannot escape this taint of sin. In my good deeds done, do I not find myself occasionally looking around to see if someone noticed? When I worship do I drink up the word of God or if the reader stumbles do I snort derisively, ignoring the 100 words he read correctly and focusing on the one mistake. I am a miserable human being.
5. Am I terrified by Baptism's stark call? Does the idea of death to all things excite me but also terrify me? Is it that old man who fears to die, not believing that on the other side of penitential death lies a real and satisfying life which does not know death? Do I succumb to the prevalent idea that being good is synonymous with being boring. Do only naughty people have fun?

6. My eyes are fixed squarely on my problems, my sins. Like John watching God approach, I feel my own unworthiness acutely.
7. Who will fix this problem? There is no solution on the horizon which can do anything but put a bandaid on it. How does one stop the inexorable march of death? How does one make right a world which is so profoundly broken?

Gospel

1. God has not turned from our sinfulness in disgust, but has sent His beloved Son into the world to do something about it. He knows that you are a miserable resolution keeper. You cannot even repent fully. That is why Jesus was found in the waters of the Jordan so long ago. He was repenting for you.
2. Like a surgeon, he attacks the old man and slays him day after day. The life he gave us in our baptism is also tenacious and strong. The old man finds it impossible to slay the new man too. Even when my life feels cold and lifeless a breath from God, a memory of His love, a miracle, is just around the corner and he revivifies his people until their dying day.
3. Having fulfilled our repentance, God has given us a righteousness which knows no stain. Jesus has run the complete human race and we are totally redeemed. Not even our failures to repent can come between us and God. He has overcome the problem himself.
4. Now, even though our lives are not rid of sin, they are also lived for him and he delights in our worship and our good deeds despite our old man's best efforts to taint them with sin. He works through our words and our deeds, even though they are sinful too. Our lives are seen through the righteousness of Christ, and our lives are powerfully attracted to that righteousness, both in spirit and in physical fact.
5. God overcomes my fear and hesitancy. His work is gentle and pure and good, we are not overwhelmed but gently called to his side. He empowers our yes with His love, not his power, so even though our yes is fearful and trembling, it is a real thing, it is a holy thing.
6. Thus he opens heaven to us, God does not see us through the lens of our sins anymore, but through the lens of the cross. We are still the folk who once rebelled, but we are now first and always the people for whom Jesus died. God opens our minds and hearts to see that, as he did John's eyes when he saw the spirit and heard the voice.
7. Jesus has the authority to be the solution of our sinfulness. He is the Son of God, he has the Holy Spirit.

Sermon Themes:

1. Behold my gentle servant, he has come to take you by the hand! (That the Holy Spirit would give the hearer peace – God has sent his servant Jesus to care for them.)

This day of the baptism of Jesus proclaims that God has sent His Son, the Servant of whom Isaiah sings, into this world with a purpose. He has come because God has seen the plight of sinful, broken, miserable, suffering people. His answer to all this is Jesus. This sermon will direct the hearers' eyes to see the servant whom God has sent to be their help. A couple of things seem important to us as we consider this servant.

- a. The servant is gentle. He brings justice but not like we expect justice. We look for justice to come from power properly wielded. We look for a government to send in the police, arrest the bad guys, work justice for the oppressed by sending the oppressor to jail or worse. But this servant works another way. He does not put out the dimly burning wick. The bruised reed he does not break.
- b. He does not grow weary in his pursuit of justice. He is relentless in his pursuit of Justice for this world, but his relentless pursuit brings him to cross and tomb. He does not throw the bad guys in jail but prays for them as he hangs dying. We grow discouraged sometimes, he never does.
- c. God takes him by the hand so he can take us by the hand. The fact that Jesus is standing there in a muddy river getting baptized today is important. He has hands, you see. He is one of us, so he can take us by the hand. He has been in prison. He has been blinded by grief and subject to darkness. He stands between us and the transcendent God, conveying the very love of God for his fallen creation through his perforated hands. He can take us by the hand and lead the prisoner out of the dungeon because he has hands!
- d. That said, he works with the very authority of the Father. It says that God keeps him. He is fully human but it is God himself who sees this through. When Jesus speaks justice it is no sham, it is no ineffectual mouthing of meaningless words. God will share his glory with no other. He will do this himself. As it says in Hebrews 1, in the past God spoke through prophets, but now he speaks through His Son.

The preacher will want to remember the goal of this whole sermon. The hearer should be comforted. The grieving person should delight that God has seen their eyes blinded by tears and the sense of entrapment which the death of a loved one brings to us. Jesus shines in that moment and leads us out into life. He stands in this waters of John's baptism today because we need this Jesus. Praise God we have him!

2. He did what I have failed to do – full and complete repentance of all my sins. (That the Holy Spirit would revive and empower the faith of the hearer, the faith which trusts that Jesus has fully and completely accomplished his/her salvation so that heaven be opened unto them.)

Just what was Jesus doing in that water? He was repenting of sins? Whose sins? My sins! He has taken them all to himself, repented of them fully and born them all the way to the cross. Now my baptism into his death has meaning every day of my life. I cannot see my failures the same way ever again, they do not torment me but serve to remind me of the good that Jesus has done for me. Consider our notes under the Gospel reading here. What if it is John who sees the heaven's opened in the baptism of Jesus and us too? Do we see heaven opened to us, a way which sin had barred but now stands open before us? The heaven's are opened to both Jesus and John. Are we standing there with John today? In Jesus baptism we see that heaven is open for us too.

An illustration which might work: In the dreariest days of the continental army's winter in Valley Forge, a corporal was tasked with a squad of men to construct a defensive work with logs. A tall man on a horse observed him screaming at the men to lift a heavy beam which was simply too much for them in their weakened condition. The man, physically tall and strong, jumped off his horse and helped them heave the beam into place. He turned on the corporal and asked him why he did not help. Drawing himself up to full height, he responded that he was a corporal. Pulling his heavy coat aside to reveal his uniform, George Washington replied, "and I am a general." God does not scream at us to get our life in shape. He himself makes it right, heaves the beam which we cannot lift.

Our enemy does not want us to trust this truth, and our human nature rebels against this very idea. Don't we all know that there is no such thing as a free lunch? You will have to pay for this sometime! But God works on a totally different economy than we do, he works in the purest love and grace and mercy. Look at what Isaiah foresaw. The servant does something new. God has brought the former things to pass and now brings another new thing to pass, your very salvation. God has worked out this salvation in the waters of the Jordan and the cruel hill and brutal cross of Calvary, in the healing of foul lepers and the forgiving of even more foul sinners.

This is a great epiphany passage, heaven is opened to all of us. He is pleased with all of us now!

3. Baptized into Christ (Epistle lesson: That Jesus and the Holy Spirit would empower the resolve of Christians to amend their sinful and broken lives.)

We all know that the vast majority of New Year's resolutions will not make it to the end of the first week. We are lousy repenters and amenders of our own sinful lives. Have you

ever considered that making a New Year Resolution is really a form of repentance and a penitential vow? God knows our inability to do this, which is why he has undertaken this task too.

This does something very necessary for us. It completely removes even my repentance from the economy of salvation. God does not forgive me because I repent. It is not the case that I am somehow more forgivable in my repentance than the man or woman who does not repent. God's love and favor are not for sale like that. They are purely and wholly a gift given to undeserving wretches, all of them. That means my failures of repentance are not the thing which would keep me from God's favor. Indeed, it is my penitential failures which have prompted Jesus to enter Jordan's stream today, to fulfill a righteousness I am incapable of.

But before you cast aside all the resolutions and the solemn vows to repent which we have uttered through our tears of shame, pain, and remorse, know this: God likes those vows. In fact Jesus is repenting today because repentance is a good thing. Paul will not let us simply let Jesus do all the good and descend into the fleshly and degraded pits of our sins. Christ has come even to this depth that he might raise us up. United to him in death and resurrection, we are given to live a new life today in Christ.

Your resolutions, the good and healthy ones, are pleasing to God. Jesus wants you to keep you them, not because that makes you more lovable, but because he loves you and he knows that they are good for you, and he offers his help to you. He unites himself in your baptism to you. Hear what Paul says here. We died to the old way of life, raised by God, we today live newly in Him. That today is really important. This is not a future reality, but a current reality, even a 2014 reality. Consider your resolutions anew, and remember you have a great help in God. Did you resolve to spend more time with the family? Did you resolve to lose some weight or forgive more readily? You have been united to the one who lived a perfect life for you. He is ready to help you take one small or large step closer to him today.

Have you already broken those resolution? You can never exhaust the love of God. His embrace and help are offered to you right now, once more. Get up, don't think that one failure has kept you from the goal. But rejoice, faltering steps, set backs, failures are all part of this. He knows it, that is why he came. He loves you and wants you to make it one step closer today.

4. Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight! (OT and Gospel - That the Spirit of God, poured out upon Jesus and poured out upon us in our baptism would empower the Christian life to be a witness to Christ today.)

This sermon wants to contemporize this. One of the temptations of preaching is to suggest that this is all really about events that happened a long time ago. Our sermons

become simply history lessons, but while the Gospel is intimately connected to that historical narrative, this is a very weak proclamation of the Gospel. Jesus is not proclaimed in the past tense, nor the future tense, but in the present. This sermon needs to open the eyes of people to what Jesus is doing right now in our midst. It needs to see that hopefully and faithfully. We bear witness to the Jesus who is here right now.

Isaiah the prophet urged his readers to look and see the servant of God. We repeat that call nearly 3000 years later. We would see Jesus. He will be visible to the eyes of faith, the eyes which baptismal waters have opened. God has called us all his beloved and delightful children in our baptism. We see that through the eyes of faith, it is a reality right now. We see the same loving face the lepers and children and widows saw in Galilee. We feel the same loving touch the lame and blind and deaf encountered in their healing. We hear the same voice calling and exhorting this generation to repent and believe for the kingdom of God is at hand.

But we do not peer out the windows of our church to find these things. We do not shut the doors and fervently pray that he would come into our midst. We acknowledge that he is already here. The touching is through my hands, the voice has my upper Midwest intonations to it, or southern twang, or whatever marks my voice.

This is tough to illustrate: Jesus is in the act of kindness, the help, the food, the hug, the kind word, the simple deed. Jesus is often there in the least of these whom we help. Interestingly, Jesus is present in both the one being helped and the one helping. Jesus is the high priest and so he speaks in our prayers. Jesus is the prophet whose words ring out in our feeble and humble attempts to bear witness to him. Jesus is the king whose authority echoes in every word of forgiveness we speak. The same words that Jesus heard at his own baptism, the proclamation of Isaiah about a beloved servant, those words are all for me.

The Baptism into which I was baptized has united me with Christ. Now when Isaiah urges the world to behold the servant, to my surprise, I see him gesturing to me, urging them to look at me. I am the servant of the Lord, empowered by the Spirit of God, holding that same authority which God has given to me. I forgive sins, I feed the hungry, I tend the sick, I pray and God always hears me. That baptism has rendered my voice precious to God. That baptism means my words are the vessels for Christ to speak to this generation of sinners. That baptism means that the Holy Spirit burns in me and moves me to acts of servant love to this world, just as Jesus beheld the multitudes and his guts were wrenched on their behalf. Jesus' great love, which now lives in me, drove him to the cross where he died for the sins of the whole world. That same love, that same authority, that same Spirit now dwells in me.

Critical to this whole enterprise will be to convince the typical Lutheran that God indeed loves a worm like me. This needs proclamation and the preacher needs to count on the

Holy Spirit to do the convincing. It is easy for us to forgive another, or at least try to do that. But when it comes to taking God's word at face value when he speaks to us, that is much harder. This sermon will really hang on the idea that God meant it when he said to me and you "I love you." That was not a platitude, as if God could ever speak a platitude.

That love of God is the empowerment for the proclamation to which this sermon calls the hearer. It is the new life of which Paul speaks. God's love for his servant renders the servant a light to the nations, a covenant for the people, a blessing which does not snuff out the smoldering wick or break the bruised reed. It is gentle and Jesus-like. It brings God's beautiful justice to this benighted world.